

Chicago Region Environmental & Transportation Efficiency (CREATE) Program

Key Takeaway: CREATE is the gold standard in public-private partnerships. Through strategic infrastructure investments and private sector/government collaboration, the CREATE program enhances transportation efficiency to move more people and goods while reducing congestion, improving air quality, and promoting economic growth in Chicago, the nation's busiest rail hub.

Chicago's location in the center of America is as important as the human heart in the body. For 150 years, Chicago has remained the nation's busiest rail hub. All six U.S. Class I railroads operate there, as do many non-Class I railroads. As freight rail volumes and demand for passenger rail service continue to rise, Chicago has also become the largest U.S. rail chokepoint.

To improve the flow of trains through the rail heart of America, the region's six Class I railroads joined forces with Amtrak, Metra, the Illinois Department of Transportation, the Cook County Department of Transportation and Highways, and the Chicago Department of Transportation to form the [CREATE Program](#). Launched in 2003, the \$4.6 billion plan involves 70 critical rail and highway infrastructure improvement projects in northeastern Illinois to enhance the efficiency and safety of the region's rail network.

Public-private partnerships benefit everyone.

Rail transportation offers numerous benefits to the public, including lower costs, reduced congestion on highways, decreased fuel consumption, lower GHG emissions and improved safety. Public-private partnerships are crucial in expanding rail usage, with governments focusing on paying for the public benefits of projects, while freight railroads cover the benefits they receive. This collaborative approach ensures mutual gains for all parties involved and allows projects to happen that might otherwise be delayed or never initiated due to financial constraints.

Freight railroads play a significant role in benefiting the American public, with partnerships aimed at achieving specific objectives that enhance infrastructure, economic development, environmental sustainability and transportation efficiency. Examples of successful rail public-private partnerships include the Alameda Corridor, the Heartland Corridor and the National Gateway Project, and the Crescent Corridor, each contributing to improved freight transportation, economic growth, and job creation in their respective regions.

CREATE is the largest-ever public-private partnership.

One of every four U.S. freight trains passes through Chicago. That's about 500 freight trains and 800 passenger and commuter trains every day. The U.S. rail network depends on the Chicago region. Along four rail corridors throughout the region, the Program increases capacity and efficiency and reduces travel times for freight and passenger trains; Eliminate or reduce railroad crossing delays for motorists and emergency vehicles; Benefit the local communities; and reduces train idling, emissions and horn noise.

The 75th Street Corridor Improvement Project (CIP) is the largest CREATE project. Spanning various Chicago neighborhoods, the project aims to address rail and road challenges, enhancing the overall flow for trains, pedestrians, cyclists and vehicles. Construction, which began in 2022, is progressing on projects like Forest Hill Flyover and 71st St. Grade Separation.

Improving Safety

As part of the 70 CREATE projects, 25 will separate crossings with new roadway overpasses and underpasses at locations where pedestrian, auto and emergency vehicles travel over grade-level railroad tracks. Six projects will implement new rail overpasses or underpasses to separate passenger and freight train tracks. These improvements will allow emergency vehicles to move more efficiently, keep pedestrians and drivers off the tracks and save commuters 230,000 hours annually in grade crossing delays.

Increasing Capacity

CREATE will help improve the region's economy by adding an estimated 44,000 jobs and generating \$31.5 billion in economic benefits over the next three decades. According to the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP), exports from Illinois have more than doubled in the past decade. The DOT predicts the volume of imported and exported goods transported via rail to, from or through Chicago will increase by around 175% between 2010 and 2040. Infrastructure improvements planned through the CREATE Program are critical to fully unlocking the potential of the national freight rail system to meet this future demand.

Relieving Congestion

CREATE addresses one of the most congested points in Chicago and the national rail network. The 75th Street Corridor Improvement Project (CIP) will reduce congestion where 30 Metra trains, roughly 90 freight trains and two Amtrak trains cross each other daily. The project will also benefit freight customers, reduce emissions due to train idling and will eliminate 3.5 hours of daily road closures for drivers.

Increasing Fluidity

Effectively managing the heart of the rail network takes more than just new infrastructure; it takes meticulous, coordinated planning across all railroads to manage operations efficiently. The Chicago Integrated Rail Operations Center (CIROC) is the brain that helps make that possible. This 24/7 command center allows railroads to continually watch real-time information fed in from sensors placed across the network.

Using advanced computer programs, railroad companies work together to anticipate potential operational problems, forecast events that reduce speed and capacity, such as severe weather, review train routing and schedules, and mobilize the right equipment and personnel to keep freight moving through the city, especially during rush hour.